

Development: the devil we know?

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ABSTRACT *Post-development theories have been accused of not having a future programme, and a number of authors has concluded that we are better off pursuing development as we know it. But the lack of instrumentality is not in itself a weighty argument against the analysis. At its best, 'post-development' offers an explanation of why so many development projects seem to fail. Two contributions are emphasised here: that transformation through development is linked to the agencies of elites, and that technical constraints imposed on developers shape the way in which they construct the problem. There is a need for extending the analysis, however. Including how development interventions are transformed in encounters with target populations gives a less rigid picture of the power of development, and can expose some of the problematic premises on which development interventions are based. In this way, post-development can offer a contribution to the practitioners of development.*

Imagine Marx, after completing *Das Kapital*, having second thoughts on the feasibility of communist society and concluding that, since no practical solutions can be drawn from his critique of the capitalist system, we had better stick to the system we know. According to some, history might have proven him right, but that would have left us without the denaturalising critique of capitalist relations that still serves as an inspiration for many today. A similar attitude seems to be gaining ground with regard to the theories that have been loosely grouped under the headings of post-development and with the post-structuralist critique of development. Some articles in the previous volume of *Third World Quarterly* (eg Nederveen Pieterse, 2000; Schuurman, 2000) offer an evaluation of the critique of development put forward in the past decade and conclude that, while the critique is sensible enough, post-development is flawed because no alternatives can be derived from it. So, the argument goes, post-development offers an interesting critique of the development apparatus, but it does not point to a way forward.

This lack of instrumentality is not a weighty argument against the analysis itself, however. Post-development attempts to demonstrate why development interventions do not work, and this must be kept separate from a call for alternatives. Poverty is a major challenge and a very real problem, but it is precisely because of this that the critique levelled against development cannot be ignored. The aim of this article is twofold: first, I want to emphasise the importance of

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retaining the insights from the critique of the past decade. The first part of the article therefore highlights what I believe is the main achievement of this literature: that it offers a possible explanation of why 50 years of development interventions have produced so little effect. Second, I will argue that although the critique in itself does not point to a way forward for development practice, an extension of the critique to include an examination of how development interventions are transformed in encounters with target populations, might do so indirectly. This is because these analyses demonstrate that some of the premises on which development interventions are based do not hold. For those who retain faith in the ability of development institutions to deliver development, this is surely not irrelevant.

Post-development

Writing grouped under the headings of ‘post-development’ or the ‘post-structuralist critique of development’ is, as the terms imply, critical of development as it has been practised since WWII. Further, most of this writing is in some ways inspired by Foucault, and tends to see development as a discourse that orders and creates the object that it pertains to address. But here the agreement ends. Some set out to refute ‘development’ in all its manifestations. Sachs, in *The Development Dictionary* (1995), and Escobar, in his early work (1984), see the past 40 years of development as a direct continuation of the colonial project. Modernisation theories after WWII were built on the assumption that the rest of the world could follow the US example, and the USA portrayed itself as the ‘beacon on the hill’ (Sachs, 1995: 1), an example for all to follow. Esteva (1995), writing in the same volume, stresses the constructed nature of underdevelopment. It began, he maintains, ‘on January 20, 1949’ (the day of President Truman’s inauguration speech). From that day, argues Esteva, the majority of the world’s population were no longer seen as diverse peoples, but were turned into a homogeneous mass characterised by their condition as underdeveloped. This time is also marked as the beginning of development by several other contributors to the *Development Dictionary*, and is put forward as an occasion that launched the key organising metaphors of development by Porter (1995).

Escobar (1995), the most profiled writer within this genre, builds explicitly on Foucault in his analysis. He is concerned with examining how what is portrayed as neutral knowledge about an object creates that object by establishing a set of relations between its elements. Through this mechanism, a set of procedures that decides what constitutes valid statements is produced, thereby displacing alternative ways of seeing the world. The political dimension in this explanation lies foremost in the normalising effects of development discourse. Others have seen a more direct political agenda in development. A decade ago, Nederveen Pieterse (1991) argued that development was launched by the Americans to forestall the spread of communism. This was certainly one important aspect of modernisation: in the same speech that according to Esteva and others launched development, Truman was explicit about presenting development as an alternative to communism, ‘the false philosophy which has made such headway throughout the world, misleading many peoples and adding to their sorrows and their

difficulties' (Caufield, 1996: 48).

Escobar and others offer a broad critique of development as a unitised homogeneous power play with the 'poor' as the victim. Their target is development as it was formed and institutionalised in the years after WWII. This has been one of the allegations levelled against the analyses: the critique does not take into account newer trends and practices in development assistance. Thus Nederveen Pieterse, in his more recent writings, points out that Escobar's claim that 'the World Bank stories are "all the same" ignores the tremendous discontinuities in the Bank's discourse over time' (1998: 363). This disagreement is a result of different perspectives: from the point of view of post-development, with its focus on the discursive formation of development, what appears to the practitioner as groundbreaking revolutions is instead seen as a different constellation of the same elements.

Some writers seek to avoid the schematic description of development by distancing themselves from the purely discursive approach. This has taken two forms: either providing a more detailed history of development theories, or examining the effects of development interventions. Cowen and Shenton (1995, 1996) take the *Development Dictionary* approach to task for ignoring the historical roots of the modern meaning of 'development'. Ideas about development and underdevelopment, they argue, were not created in the aftermath of WWII, but can be traced back to classical ideas about change. The modern interventionist development (what they term 'intentional development') has roots that stretch back to the first half of the 19th century. Their work offers a much more detailed and historically grounded account of the various threads of development thinking than the more polemical publications of many post-development writers. One of their main points is especially important for the argument here: that the idea of intentional development is inherently based on a notion of trusteeship. When development was conceived of as a state practice in the first half of the 19th century, they argue, those who saw themselves as developed took it upon themselves to guide the development of those who were not. Although newer versions of development argue against a top-down approach to development, they do not avoid this problem. The reason is simply that a development process is always initiated with a specific goal in mind and, although developers portray themselves as 'facilitators', they still know where the process ought to be heading. Cowen and Shenton argue that this leads to a tautology, because the goal of development is assumed to be present before the commencement of a development process. Thus, the building of civil institutions characterised by separation of person and office (to avoid 'corruption'), often assumes that the group of people with whom one is negotiating already functions according to this ideal (Nustad, 1999).

Other scholars have sought to modify the discursive approach by examining the effects produced by the discourse. Ferguson's *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1990) contains what I believe to be one of the key insights from this literature: that the effects produced by development discourse (as he sees it, a depoliticisation of development and a spread of bureaucratic power relations) do not come about as a result of bad faith on the part of the developers. By separating intentions and outcomes, he shows that the depoliticising effects of development

discourse are produced by the constraints imposed on developers. They have to construct the field in which they want to intervene in such a way that intervention is possible. Therefore, a local, technical perspective is substituted for a more global, political perspective on the processes that produce poverty in the first place.

This insight is not specific to the post-development literature: Kaplan, writing 50 years ago, was describing the same process when he wrote that 'when all you have is the hammer, the whole world looks like a nail' (quoted in Deleon, 1991; see also Nustad & Sending, 2000). More recently, Scott (1998) has developed the insight in his book *Seeing like a State*, where he argues that, in order to control and intervene in populations, states have to produce simplified and schematic models of the reality in which they want to intervene. An example will help clarify this point: Hart (1982) lists what he sees as the preconditions for the development of West Africa:

Agriculture linked to simple technology manufactures for the home market is the appropriate emphasis at this point in West Africa's history. But for this strategy to be realized as an effective force for development, existing political structures will have to be drastically changed: The boundaries on the map will have to be redrawn to permit more inclusive political and economic units to emerge; and the composition and priorities of the entrenched ruling classes will have to be altered (Hart, 1982: 154).

This programme is clearly out of reach for a development organisation with limited funds and time constraints, which needs to show donors that they have achieved 'development' for their money. What a development organisation can do is to identify the lack of some specific piece of technology (a well, a community centre, houses) as a problem and concentrate its efforts on delivering it. This explains the widespread emphasis on technical solutions and the construction of the problem as localised. In this way, the depoliticising effect of development is produced.

To sum up, the writings directly inspired by Foucault have served to illuminate the political and power aspects of what was earlier seen as a neutral and practical problem: how to deliver development to poor people. Further, the apparatus that emerged after WWII was shaped by the political climate of the time and explicitly set out to provide an alternative to communist ideology. The analyses that seek to transcend the limitations of the discursive approach have examined development as a historical process and examined the effects produced by development discourse. From the first perspective emerged the insight that development is based on an idea of trusteeship; from the second, that development tends to depoliticise poverty because of the limitations imposed on the developers themselves. I believe, as I have said, that this insight must be retained, while the focus is shifted to how these processes are manifested in concrete encounters. Below, I will pursue these two issues separately by first arguing that development is built on certain premises that no amount of reform will displace. Second, I shall argue that this conclusion is in itself incomplete: these effects of development are modified when the focus is shifted from discourses of development to the practice of development.

Development and trusteeship

Let me pursue the first part of my argument with the aid of an analogy: the ideas of 'justice' and 'popular justice'. In a discussion with Maoists about the possibility of post-revolutionary 'popular justice', Foucault is at pains to point out why the form of the court cannot be adapted to a true expression of the will of the people (Foucault, 1980). Victor, his Maoist opponent, argues for the necessity of setting up 'people's courts' after the revolution. Foucault, on the other hand, proceeds by pointing out that acts of popular justice in France and elsewhere in Western Europe have been profoundly anti-judicial; they are contrary to the very form of the court. The form of the court, Foucault argues, is an expression of a bourgeois idea of justice. Consider the physical layout of a court:

a table, and behind this table, which distances them from the two litigants, the 'third party', that is, the judges. Their position indicates firstly that they are neutral with respect to each litigant, and secondly this implies that their decision is not already arrived at in advance, that it will be made after an aural investigation of the two parties, on the basis of a certain conception of truth and a certain number of ideas concerning what is just and unjust, and thirdly that they have the authority to enforce their decision. (1980: 8)

This is, Foucault argues, foreign to the very idea of popular justice. There is a parallel here to the attempt to rid development of its origin in trusteeship while retaining the conceptual apparatus. In response to criticisms that development has been a practice imposed by the state, the development industry has set out to reinvent itself as the facilitator of a development that has its origin in people's concerns. The image presented to us is one in which development grows out of 'grassroots' concern, assisted and facilitated by development experts. Thus Nelson and Wright state that 'participation' must involve a shift in power to be more than a palliative (1995:1). This shift involves an integration of local knowledge in the development process. In the same spirit Edwards (1989) argues that development studies have been irrelevant to the practice of development since they are based on expert knowledge. The solution, he argues, is to deploy participatory research methods.

But the appropriation of a participatory vocabulary does not in itself constitute a transferral of power (Nustad, 1997). Just as the form of the court was the expression of a certain conception of justice, so the apparatus of development is, as Cowen and Shenton have pointed out, built on an idea of trusteeship. When intentional development was conceived as a state practice in the first half of the 19th century, the notion of trusteeship was seen as unproblematic. Those who saw themselves as developed took it upon themselves to guide those who were seen as less developed. Bottom-up development, on the other hand, takes as its point of departure a rejection of trusteeship. Cowen and Shenton point out that intentional development builds on a tautology: 'Logically, the confusion arises out of an old utilitarian tautology. Because development, whatever definition is used, appears as both means and goal, the goal is most often unwittingly assumed to be present at the onset of the process of development itself' (1996: 4). Thus to speak of 'bottom-up development' is to confuse the means and the goals of

development. If the goal of development is defined as enlarging people's choice, this presupposes 'a desire and capacity to choose, as well as knowledge of possible choices' (p 4). These factors, they argue, are often considered a precondition for development as well as the goal for development. The missing link in these explanations is trusteeship. Someone who has the necessary vantage point guides and controls the development process.

This is why I remain sceptical of attempts to reform the development apparatus to achieve a 'true' development from the bottom. Proposals for reform tend to look more like recapitulations of old efforts than true attempts at reform. Culpeper (1997), for example, argues that 'problems such as overpopulation, global warming and environmental collapse, mass poverty ... can only become more common in the absence of a rule-based, rule-abiding, and cooperative global community' (p 3). This community, further, 'requires viable and effective institutions to act on behalf of the common interest' (p 3). The trustee is here effectively re-installed. As the dependency theorists pointed out three decades ago, and as the history of the multilateral development system has made abundantly clear, there is no way one can assume a 'common interest' as a basis for policy.

Whither now?

So far, I have examined arguments that point out the top-down assumptions of development, and the effects that this has—to raise doubts about the possibility of a democratic reform of the current development apparatus and the possibility of a bottom-up approach to development. This is in part because the intervening agent has to construct the object it addresses in a way that makes intervention possible. The analogy with justice helps clarify this point: that, embedded in an apparatus, a form, lies an implicit premise on which an approach is built, and that no amount of 're-form' will change those premises. The court itself conveys the idea of a universal justice and a neutral third party, in the same way that development discourse conveys the idea of trusteeship.

This is where most post-structuralist writings on development end. No wonder, then, that Nederveen Pieterse laments that 'post-development articulates meaningful sensibilities but does not have a future programme' (1998: 345). I have argued that these 'meaningful sensibilities' have a value in themselves, because they point to a possible explanation for why development interventions so often fail. But I want to take this one step further, and argue that a more grounded approach to the study of development interventions might yield insights that can be useful to development practitioners as well.

To continue with the analogy of the court, case studies have shown that the actual functioning of that institution might be very different from what its form implies. Thus Spencer (1999), in his ethnography of life in a Sinhala village, argues that the courts set up by the British colonial authority, far from imposing an idea of bourgeois justice on the inhabitants, were used by them as an extension of local political struggles. In the 1860s between 7% and 8% of the population were taken to court each year, while only 10% of the cases led to convictions. Spencer, following John Rogers, argues that the courts were adapted to the

peasants' own purposes, and argues that they were used in much the same way as sorcery and demon rites had previously been used. This led a governor to lament that 'in their attempts to adapt our system to their wants they ... have abused the process of criminal procedures, as the cheaper and more efficacious mode of enforcing their civil rights and of avenging their petty quarrels' (Spencer, 1999: 223). Even a court, it seems, a form that carries with it so much ideological baggage, is open to adaptation to different ends.

Most post-development writings have focused on the development apparatus itself: how it constructs and orders the reality in which it seeks to intervene. But, as Spencer points out for the functioning of the court, it does not follow from this that the social world is created in the image of the developers. Thus Grillo (1997) has argued that the writings of Escobar and others portray development as 'a monolithic enterprise, heavily controlled from the top, convinced of the superiority of its own wisdom and impervious to local knowledge, or indeed common-sense experience, a single gaze or voice which is all-powerful and beyond influence' (Grillo 1997: 20). Kiely (1999) argues that 'post-development discourse tends to imply a passive Third World, simply having its strings pulled by the all-powerful West' (p 48). This is a critique that has been levelled against discourse analysis more generally. In conversations together, Trombadori criticises Foucault for a 'lack of individuating *real subjects* who are capable of determining a relation of power: in the context of the tensions of a discursive formation or of a particular apparatus in which knowledge and power are intertwined', and asks, '*who* struggles against *whom*?' (Foucault, 1991: 18–19, emphasis in original).

It is certainly true that the focus of these writings is very much on the discourse of the developers, how they portray and construct the object to be developed. The way forward for development studies, I believe, is to examine how development interventions are transformed, reformulated, adopted or resisted in local encounters. Development interventions might not in practice function as an expression and concretisation of the ideological baggage on which they are built. A growing literature is exploring these issues. Everett (1997) argues that post-structuralists have ignored the agency of local elites as well as of 'target populations'. As an example we are introduced to a development project in Bogotá, Colombia, where the local elite used the language of 'sustainable' and 'participatory' development to secure their interests (controlling the spread of squatting near the city). This rhetoric, she demonstrates, did not fool the residents of the informal settlements who mobilised against the development project. This she uses to argue that post-structuralist critics of development 'have largely failed to reveal the agents of this repressive system. By leaving out or simplifying agency, they portray development as both more unified and more powerful than it is' (Everett, 1997: 147). She agrees that the consequences of development might be misunderstood by those involved but goes on to say that 'this fact does not mean that conscious actions and motivations have no role in shaping development interventions' (Everett, 1997: 147). Here she seems to be arguing with a 'straw-man' post-structuralism (Ferguson, for example, does not leave conscious actions and motivations out in his description of development; he argues that they cannot be identified with outcomes) but nevertheless she has a point. With an

analytic focus on the practitioners of development and how they construct their object through the discourse of development, the reactions of the people to be developed are neglected.

Some European academics who partly adopt a discursive approach set out to avoid many of these problems. Long (1992) argues for an actor-orientated approach when studying development encounters. He sets an agenda that examines such encounters through the concept of 'interface'. This perspective focuses on how the different actors involved 'attempt to create room for manoeuvre so that they might pursue their own "projects"' (1992: 36). In a later publication, Arce and Long (2000) argue for an approach that examines how localised practices adopt and change the ideologies imposed on them by modernising agencies. They call for an ethnographic examination of how 'official discourses' compare with 'the strategies and language games of local people who face new and increasingly global social relations' (2000: 3). They thereby make the important point that the spread of hegemonic discourses such as development is always played out in local encounters and through human agency.

One approach to this is demonstrated by Arce and Long (1993). They studied the Mexican Food Programme, a large effort to create a rural development programme, through the person of the fieldworker Roberto. In their account, this person embodies the contradiction between local interests and the state-led development programme. Roberto is met with scepticism from the local peasants whom he wants to help, and only gains their trust through an act of distancing himself from the government. He fails at first to obtain signatures from the peasants for a petition he wants to present to the headquarters. One night, while sitting with a group of peasants around the campfire, he rages against the government and says that he would like to shoot the president, who 'is at the centre of the web' he feels caught in (1993: 199). As a result of this act of demarcation between himself and the bureaucracy, he is promised support for the petition by one of the peasants, provided he works to obtain a good that the peasant wants: cherry trees. He agrees to this, but finds himself unable to keep his promise. The contradiction, then, between the interests of the peasants and that of the development bureaucracy, is played out in the person of Roberto. In order to distance himself from the government that has earned the peasants' distrust, he both had to disavow that government and make promises that he could not keep. He was seen as disloyal both by his employer and by the peasants, and eventually he was transferred to another district.

The strength of this case is that the contradiction between the structuring effects of the development discourse and the interests of the peasants is analysed through the person of the intermediary, thus giving meat and bone to the process. My own research on a development project in Durban's Cato Manor parallels Spencer's description of colonial courts (Nustad, 1999). Post-apartheid development projects have to create a distance between themselves and the top-down development projects of the apartheid era, and have therefore come to advocate a bottom-up and people-driven version of development (Nustad, 1996). In practical terms, this has led the developers to establish local development committees to function as intermediaries between themselves and the community. Based on the premises of bottom-up development, these committees were meant to express the

interests of the larger community. But these positions, from the point of view of the community leadership, also represented access to outside development resources. Securing a place on a development committee therefore became part of an ongoing power struggle within the community leadership. Numerous attempts at negotiating development failed, because development resources were used by the local leadership to strengthen their own positions. This undermined all attempts at development, and eventually led to an armed conflict that destroyed all organisations in the area.

In this example, the object in which one sought to intervene—the community of Cato Crest—lacked the characteristic that was a premise for the intervention. For the development committee to function as an extension of the interests of the wider community presupposed a separation of office and person on the part of its members. In the volatile and often violent local politics of Cato Crest, those who had managed to secure prominent positions had most often done so by acting in direct contradiction of that principle. They were powerful and influential because they were able to secure resources and build up a personal following.

Examples such as these show that, although it is possible, on a conceptual level, to demonstrate that a development apparatus conveys certain effects, things are not so clear-cut on the ground. What I have argued, then, is that the answer to the realisation that the post-structuralist critique of development seems to have reached a dead end is not to continue business as usual. Instead, the insights from this literature should be retained. First, we should acknowledge that the apparatus in which development is embedded in itself has certain effects, such as the depolitisation of poverty, and is built on certain assumptions, such as the agency of an outside intervening body. But in addition, it is important to study the manifestations of development in concrete encounters. This will enable us to see that social life is less determined than an analysis that focuses solely on how development is constituted as a discourse would lead us to believe. Further, for those who believe in the ability of the development apparatus to change people's lives for the better, insights such as the ones derived from the study of the development intervention in Cato Crest are surely not irrelevant. If the development of Cato Crest is to succeed, an intervention must be based on a recognition of how the local political system works.

Conclusion

This does not of course supply an answer to those who to want salvage post-development by deriving new ways of practising development from it. But I think it unlikely that the institutions which have so far made this problem their own, which for at least 50 years have supplied a shifting stream of solutions and remedies to it, are likely to solve it. Discourse analysis, at its best, has suggested an answer to why so little progress has been made.

Where is the solution to poverty going to come from, then? To continue the analogy with Foucault's discussion of popular justice, where the idea of bourgeois justice was contained within the form of the court, it follows that an expression of justice that is truly popular would be very different in form. It would probably not even be recognised as an expression of popular justice by

those working within a court and, had a new court been set up, based on its principles, the form would have corrupted the content.

The same, I believe, holds true for development. As I have argued, the call for practical solutions rests on the assumption that the apparatus now in place has the capacity to deliver a solution, and there are important reasons for doubting that premise. Instead, there is an important task ahead of reconstituting poverty within the political domain: namely, examining how poverty is produced, and the relationship between processes that produce wealth and poverty. Writings on development have tended to obscure these processes, because the analysis has been hampered by the constraints imposed on the developers who seek to intervene in specific areas.

But I have also argued that, when extended to include actual development interventions, the post-structuralist critique of development has indirect applications for development practitioners. If one retains faith in development, analyses that demonstrate that the premises on which an intervention is based do not hold surely must be of relevance. There is thus a double imperative for continuing research on how development encounters are acted out on the ground. Theoretically, post-development has been too concerned with describing development as one homogeneous field, and has overlooked the way in which development interventions have been transformed and given new meaning by those whom they seek to help. Practically, this line of research has shown how the restrictions imposed on the developers' conception of their task sometimes undermine the whole intervention. This, surely, is an important contribution, even if the critique does not have a future programme.

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